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AUTHOR Locker, Kitty O.
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ABSTRACT

Noting that one of the biggest factors in motivating students in technical writing classes is to convince them that they will need to write in their future jobs, this paper offers evidence for use by teachers in persuading students of the importance of developing their writing skills. The first part of the paper presents refutations of some of the arguments students frequently offer to explain why they will not need to write, such as: "Most of my communications will be oral," "I'll have a secretary or a technical writer to do my writing," and "I can use form letters." The second part identifies the kinds of documents people in several fields actually write, including brochures, bulletins, handbooks, newsletters, annual reports, news articles, articles for periodicals, cover letters, employee reprimands, evaluation reports, and job descriptions. The final part offers four suggestions for what should be stressed in technical writing courses: business communication; effective exposition, with special emphasis on narratives, procedures, and summaries; logic; and audience analysis and adaptation. (FL)

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WHAT DO WRITERS IN INDUSTRY WRITE?

Kitty O. Locker
Division of Business and Technical Writing
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

One of the biggest factors in motivating students in technical writing classes is simply convincing them that they will need to be able to write in their jobs in business and industry. "I know I can't write," some students say, "but that's why I'm not majoring in English. I'm very good at working with engines, or numbers, or animals; that's why I'm studying to be a technician, or an engineer, or an accountant, or a veterinarian." These students are often surprised to hear that many people in business and industry routinely write from 10 pages of letters and memos a week to, in some cases, 20-30 pages a day--far more than the average English major normally writes. In this paper, I'd like to give you some ammunition to use with such students. First, I'll refute some of the arguments students frequently offer to explain why they supposedly won't need to write. Second, I'll identify the kinds of documents writers in several fields actually write. And third, I'll suggest some implications from this survey of real-world writing for what we should stress in courses in technical writing.

"I'll Never Have to Write Because . . ."

The allegations I've heard from students seem to fall into three categories. "I'll never have to write," they claim, "because--

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1. "Most of my communication will be oral."
2. "I'll have a secretary or a technical writer to do my writing."
3. "If I do have to write, I can use form letters."

Let's look at each of these in turn. Each of them, we'll see, has a foundation (sometimes a slender one) in truth, but each is fundamentally flawed.

If one measures communication by the number of separate communication acts or by the time these acts consume, it's true that oral communication and listening take up the majority of almost every working person's day. But as Thomas Carmichael, former Training Supervisor for Allstate Insurance Company, points out, writing is still crucial:

> The telephone has not replaced the typewriter. Anytime you are dealing with someone who is not your immediate supervisor, you'll have to put down your ideas on paper as well as talk to him or her either in the flesh or on the phone. The written word is still very much a part of the power structure. Executives, like everyone else, want to protect themselves from blame when things go awry. Memos, reports, and letters furnish such protection. Phone conversations, since you can't document them, don't.

This "protection" is not a symptom of executive paranoia. As we all know from communication theory, the possibilities of miscommunication, especially if the only channel is oral, are enormous. Putting things in writing protects a company by making it clear exactly what the company is or is not offering and under what conditions the offer is

made. If the reader misinterprets a written document, legally, it's the reader's fault. If there is no written record, chaos--and expensive lawsuits--frequently result.

The second argument, that technicians will have secretaries or technical writers to handle communication for them, has some truth. In a corporation like Sundstrand, for instance, engineers do comparatively little writing because the company does have a large staff of technical writers. Technical specialists who want to move to other companies, however, or who simply want to rise within the corporation, are at a tremendous disadvantage if they can't write. As one executive in another corporation points out,

> Most applicants have trained for a specific entry-level job and seem to feel they will be doing it for a lifetime. Actually, their needs will be technical in the beginning, will become increasingly communicative over 2-10 years, and may become less technical over the balance of their careers. Indeed, their jobs will become increasingly supervisory, managerial, and administrative--while the importance and need to communicate contines to increase--in key jobs it becomes critical. Abilities to communicate and to work with other people are frequently the deciding factors in selecting between candidates for promotion.[1]

Will form letters take care of most of the situations our students will face? Letter and report format often is specified, and some organizations do require that letters and memos include specific kinds of information and follow specific patterns of organization. And there

will often be old letters in files which the neophyte can copy. Unfortunately, some of these old letters are dreadful, and imitating them is not likely to impress anyone. Furthermore, the higher our students rise in their respective organizations, the more frequently they will encounter new situations where no form letters exist. Students who fail to equip themselves with the skills necessary for good writing and original thinking are dooming themselves to stay in near-entry-level positions all their working lives.

What Do Writers in Industry Write?

The documents produced by writers in industry cover a wide variety of subjects and genres; they range from the embarrassingly amateurish to the highly professional. One index of the variety in genres is the categories used by the Society for Technical Communication in its annual competitions for technical literature and technical illustration:

CATEGORIES FOR COMPETITION

SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Technical Literature

--Brochures
--Bulletins
--Catalogs
--Consumer Handbooks and Manuals
--Industrial Handbooks and Manuals
--House Organs for Technical Organizations
--Technical Books
--Technical Newsletters
--Technical News Articles
--Periodical Articles for Technical and Trade Periodicals
--Complete Technical Periodicals
--Technical Reports
--Annual Reports for Technical Organizations

Technical Illustration

Line Illustration

--Assembly Views

--Exploded Views

--Cutaways

--Schematic and Block Diagrams

--Line Renderings

Design

--Logos

--Trademarks

--Letterheads

--Cover Designs

--Visual Aids, Charts, Posters, Projectuals

Continuous-Tone Illustrations

--Air-Brush Illustrations

--Tone Renderings Other Than Air Brush

--Photoretouching

Photography

--Black and White

--Color

We may get a clearer idea of the writing actually done in business and industry by looking at the documents produced in individual companies. Last summer, I was employed by a steel materials service center to design a comprehensive writing improvement program for employees at all 26 plants across the nation. (This company sells and fabricates steel, aluminum, and plastics to a wide variety of industrial clients.) In the research phase of my work, I read nearly 2,000 letters, memos, and short reports written by people at almost every level of every division in the company. Here's a list of the kinds of documents I saw:

INTERNAL DOCUMENTS

A STEEL MATERIALS SERVICE CENTER

1. Cover Letter; Transmittal
2. Monthly and Quarterly Reports
3. General Manager's Plant Newsletter

4. Housekeeping Memo
5. Minutes of Meetings
6. Projection of Inventory Needs
7. Major Expenditure Request
8. Policy and Procedure Bulletin
9. Request to Deviate from Policy and Procedure Bulletin
10. Announcement of Mill Price Increase
11. Credit Report on a Customer
12. Plant Productivity Study
13. Evaluation of Plant Supervision
14. Safety Report
15. Evaluation of Plant's Physical Facilities
16. Request for United Way/Crusade of Mercy Donations
17. Request for Tuition Reimbursement
18. Grievance Step Response
19. Employee Reprimand
20. Reminder to Follow Procedures
21. Request for Information from General Office or Other Plants
22. Answers to Questions from General Office or Other Plants
23. Training Manuals
24. Evaluation of Training Session
25. Invitation to Attend Quarter Century Club Dinner
26. Letter of Congratulations

EXTERNAL DOCUMENTS

A STEEL MATERIALS SERVICE CENTER

1. Quotation
2. Letter Declining to Quote on an Order
3. Letter Confirming Order

4. Letter Changing Price or Shipment Date
5. Request for Credit References
6. Credit Denial
7. Collection Letter
8. Claims Adjustment
9. Technical Advertisement
10. Follow-up Letter after Sales Call
11. Summary of Advantages and Disadvantages of a Service for a Potential Customer
12. Beginning-of-Year Letter to Important Customers
13. Letter Announcing Status of ASME Certification
14. Letters to Union Officials
15. Replies to Labor Relations Board
16. Job Descriptions
17. Letter Offering or Denying Employment
18. Press Release
19. 10-K Report
20. Annual Report
21. Reports for Government Agencies
22. Thank-you Letter

It is particularly interesting to identify the purpose(s) of each document. Although at first it may seem that the variety is bewildering, in fact all of these documents share the four basic purposes of business and technical writing: to request information, to give information, to persuade, and to build goodwill.

Most messages have multiple purposes. Policy and Procedure Bulletins are informative, but they should also build goodwill: if they are well-

written, employees are more likely to feel that the policies are fair, the procedures reasonable, and to see the bulletins as a help, not as a constraint on their own freedom. The 10-K Report filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Annual Report distributed to stockholders contain essentially the same information, but differing purposes and audiences create two distinct documents. Building goodwill--a purpose students often overlook--is particularly important when employees or customers must be given bad news. Even if a company must deny a customer credit, for example, it would still like to have that customer's cash business.

These lists, of course, represent the output of a single corporation. Do people in other organizations write the same kinds of things? Only one company has given me unlimited access to everything its employees write, but in my other consulting work, I've seen several--not all--of the materials written in other kinds of jobs.

Engineering students may be particularly interested in the writing necessary in a company's Research and Development Divisions. The following list represents some of the internal documents produced by R&D engineers at a corn- and soybean-processing firm.

INTERNAL DOCUMENTS

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

A CORN- AND SOYBEAN-PROCESSING COMPANY

1. Memo Describing a Problem or Posing a Question
2. Proposal
3. Proposal Revision
4. Progress Report
5. Project Summary
6. Closure Report
7. Housekeeping Memo

8. Answers to Technical Questions
9. Solutions to Procedural Problems
10. Trip Report

While many of these documents are informational (a Trip Report, for instance, shares information gained at a conference with engineers who did not attend), persuasion is also crucial: in order to investigate a problem, employees must first persuade their superiors--via a memo and then a formal proposal--that solving the problem or answering the question is a good use of the company's resources. Many of the documents R&D personnel write are archival: the Closure Report summarizes in great detail exactly what was done as well as what the results were. Such detail is necessary, for five years later new production techniques or changed economic conditions may make a project which seemed infeasible at the time now appear to be profitable. To make these decisions, however, management must know why the project did or did not succeed when it was first studied.

Other employees, including both middle-management people in various departments and production foremen, produce other kinds of internal documents:

ADDITIONAL INTERNAL DOCUMENTS

A CORN- AND SOYBEAN-PROCESSING COMPANY

1. Housekeeping Memos
2. Announcements of Changes in Employee Benefit Plans
3. Analysis of Customer Complaint to Recommend Whether or Not an Adjustment Should be Made
4. Evaluation of Suppliers

5. Plant Inspection Report
6. Safety Inspection Report
7. Safety Reminders
8. Cost Estimates for Expansions, New Equipment, Building Demolitions, Etc.
9. Instruction Manuals
10. Procedures
    a. For handling late deliveries
    b. For handling emergency shipments
    c. For preparing samples
    d. For picking up samples
    e. For assembling equipment
11. Recommendations for Changes in Pricing Policy
12. Sales Forecasts

This company's external communications include sales letters, customer adjustments, letters about employment, bid specifications, and answers to customer questions.

Some of our students will be working in governmental agencies rather than in private enterprise. Judging from my observations of communications in Illinois' regulatory agencies, people in at least the lower levels of government seem to produce fewer different kinds of correspondence, although the sheer volume is staggering. Here's a partial list of documents produced by regional employees of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the Illinois Department of Public Health:

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DOCUMENTS

VARIOUS STATE REGULATORY AGENCIES

1. Inspection Reports
2. Letters to Towns and Individuals Identifying Violations

3. Letters Responding to Citizen Complaints
4. Acknowledgement Letters
5. Memos Documenting Events as They Occur
6. Boil Orders
7. Housekeeping Memos
8. Performance Appraisals
9. Procedures
10. Interpretations of Regulations

Since government agencies depend on tax dollars--and thus taxpayer's continued support--building goodwill is especially important in the letters these agencies send to the public. Since regulatory agencies are granted the power to prosecute towns, corporations, or individuals who violate statutes, it is essential that both internal and external communications document clearly where the violation exists and what must be done to remedy it.

Implications for Courses in Technical Writing

The kinds of documents writers in industry write have, I believe, four implications for what we should stress in courses in technical writing.

1. Courses in technical writing should include units in business communication. All the groups I've examined, including Research and Development engineers, write housekeeping memos, answers to questions, persuasive messages, and negative messages. To write these effectively, students need some background in the following aspects of business communication:

a. Letter and Memo Format

b. Psychological Patterns of Organization

c. Style, Tone, and Tact

d. Persuasive Strategies.

2. Courses in technical writing should cover effective exposition, especially stressing narratives, procedures, and summaries. As we've seen in several of the lists, many writers must present information clearly and concisely. If we can teach students to separate main points from details, to describe events accurately, to explain procedures and give instructions clearly, and to summarize, we will have done them a great service.

3. Courses in technical writing should include units in logic. Writers in every organization have to gain approval for their ideas. As Robert E. Rodman, General Manager of the Personnel Department for Standard Oil of California, has pointed out, "The best business ideas are useless unless they can be 'sold' for implementation." Successful "selling" depends in part upon strategies of persuasion, but it also depends--particularly in industrial settings--on watertight logic. Our students need to be able to justify their decisions and to show clearly how evidence supports a conclusion.

4. Courses in technical writing should stress audience analysis and adaptation. Whatever kind of document s/he is asked to produce, a writer can be successful only if s/he understands both the reader and the intended use of the document. Several Public Health inspectors kidded one of their co-workers who routinely wrote 10-page

inspection reports, while their own reports were usually only 3 or 4 pages. The kidding stopped when one of the Department's lawyers commented that finally, in the 10-page reports, the legal staff was getting enough information to prosecute violators successfully. An awareness of the reader and his or her needs should be an integral part of every writing assignment we make.

Conclusion

Clearly, in a quarter or a semester, we can't cover every type of writing our students may be called upon to produce at some future date. But we can and should give them some idea of the diversity of documents that writers in industry write. In doing so, we'll increase their motivation to learn what we have to teach them, and we'll make our own jobs easier and more effective.

Notes

[1]Quoted in Donald Skarzenski and Donna Stine, "Motivating Business Communication Students: An Introductory Handout," The ABCA Bulletin, (42 (1979), 28.